COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA & SAFECOM TEAM UP

TO DEVELOP A STATEWIDE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS INTEROPERABILITY PLAN

Chris Essid, Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator

The lack of interoperable wireless communications is an issue plaguing public safety organizations across the country. Today, more than ever, our nation's First Responders require interoperability—the ability of public safety agencies to talk across disciplines and jurisdictions via radio communications systems, exchanging voice and/or data with one another on demand, in real time, when authorized. While some regions of Virginia have made great progress in this direction, many of the public safety responders are not able to communicate effectively with their state-level counterparts much less any federal agencies. In fact, some local fire, EMS and law enforcement often use disparate radio systems within their respective jurisdictions.

In an effort to address this situation, Virginia officials came together to develop a Statewide Strategic Communications Interoperability Plan to foster local, regional and state coordination. Commonwealth officials are working with SAFECOM—the overarching umbrella program within the federal government that oversees all initiatives and projects pertaining to public safety communications and interoperability—to develop the plan.

Housed in the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate, SAFECOM is the first national program of its kind designed by public safety for public safety. As a public safety practitioner driven program, SAFECOM works cooperatively with more than 50,000 local and state public safety agencies. The State Communications Interoperability Plan is based on the same approach—it is *driven from the local level.*

During April and May 2004, the commonwealth of Virginia and SAFECOM conducted six regional focus group sessions with local and regional public safety representatives. Participants provided valuable input and perspectives on public safety communications interoperability in Virginia.

Each session was designed as a series of conversations centered on the following—the current state of statewide and regional communications interoperability; the case for why change needs to happen; the envisioned state of interoperability in the future; and recommended strategies and barriers to successfully achieving the envisioned future state of communications interoperability.

The data gathered provided a basis for the key initiatives presented and discussed on May 18, 2004, at a strategic planning session of key public safety stakeholders. The results of this strategic planning session became the core components of Virginia's Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan. The state plan is scheduled to be completed within the next few months.

In Virginia, the Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan is the first step in the collaborative effort towards achieving communications interoperability. While there is much work to be done to implement the plan, it is critical that localities, state agencies and federal agencies continue to work together to make decisions positively impacting public safety communications. By working together across public safety professions, jurisdictions and levels of government, interoperability can truly be achieved.

The Virginia Strategic Plan will be available to be viewed and downloaded at www.interoperability.publicsafety.virginia.gov along with other valuable interoperability information and resources.